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THE FIRST TEXAS RAILROAD.

P. BRISCOE.

The first railroad built in Texas was the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos, and Colorado, commonly called in its early days the Harrisburg railroad. With this road the writer has been familiar from near the day when its building was begun down to the present time, and perhaps the following partial history of its beginnings may not be without interest to the readers of THE QUARTERLY.

The first charter for a railroad from Harrisburg was granted by the fifth congress of the Republic of Texas, January 9, 1841. The name of the corporation was the Harrisburg Railroad and Trading Company; but there is evidence that the enterprise was commenced almost one year earlier under the name of the Harrisburg and Brazos Railroad. An original contract let for three thousand cross-ties dated February 28, 1840, signed by M. L. Birdsall and by A. Briscoe, proprietor of the road, is in my possession, and a copy of it is herewith given :

REPUBLIC OF TEXAS, }
COUNTY OF HARRIS. }

This contract and agreement made and entered into this Twenty-eighth day of February, A. D. 1840, between Maurice L. Birdsall and Andrew Briscoe, proprietor of the Harrisburg and Brazos Rail Road, both of the county above-written, witnesseth: That the said Birdsall doth engage and agree, that he will take from the woods and deliver within thirty feet of the line of the said Rail Road three thousand pieces of post-oak or cedar timber in a sound state. Seven feet in length, clear of the chip or kerf, and from eight to twelve inches in diameter, hewed straight on one side, and that said timber shall be deposited five sticks or pieces to every twenty-five feet of the road; also that five hundred pieces shall be delivered within one month from the first day of March of the current year, and that the remaining Twenty-five hundred shall be delivered within four months thereafter at the discretion of the said Briscoe: In consideration of which the said Briscoe doth engage, that within ten days after the next public sale of lots

in the town of Harrisburg, or on the fifteenth day of April next, at the option of the said Birdsall, he will pay to the said Birdsall or his heirs & assigns, the value of five hundred pieces of said timber delivered as aforesaid, at the rate of fifty cents lawful money each or the equivalent thereof in the promissory notes of the government, at the option of the said Briscoe; and that if the said Birdsall should deliver more than five hundred pieces of said timber previous to said time, and if the said Briscoe should have funds in his hands belonging to the stock-holders in said Rail Road for the use of said Road, then so far as said funds shall go towards paying for said timber, the said Birdsall shall be then paid: and afterwards on the delivery of every three thousand pieces of timber by said Birdsall, the said Birdsall shall exhibit a statement of all expenses incurred by him on account of this contract, and of all monies received by him on said account; and the said Briscoe shall pay as aforesaid till the amount paid to said Birdsall shall equal the expense by him incurred, and the balance coming to said Birdsall shall be reduced to its value in the promissory notes of the government, and the said Briscoe shall give to the said Birdsall his rect. for said balance as stock in the Rail Road, for which certificates of stock shall issue when the road is vested in a chartered company or when it shall be completed to the Brazos timber; The pieces aforesaid shall be counted at the rate of fifty cents each lawful money or the equivalent thereof in the promissory notes of the government.

This agreement further witnesseth, that if the country should during the time of this contract be invaded by a foreign foe, from the time that said foe shall enter the limits of the Republic till they shall depart beyond said limits, all obligations on either party by this contract shall be suspended, and shall commence again on said departure of the enemy. Also that Andrew Briscoe aforesaid agrees that all moneys which may come into his hands on account of the Rail Road above-named, not exceeding the amount herein contemplated for this contract, shall be paid to said Birdsall, on the delivery of the timber aforesaid, (saving and excepting the sum of one thousand dollars of the promissory notes of the government, which may be needed for the purposes) till he shall be paid for said timber.

In witness whereof we have hereunto set our hands and seals at Harrisburg the day and year first aforesaid.

Witness—

WM. P. HARRIS

LEWIS B. HARRIS.

M. L. BIRDSALL (seal)

A. BRISCOE (seal)

Wrapped up in the original contract is an order on A. Briscoe

for one hundred and fifty dollars in Texas promissory notes, dated May 8, 1840, and signed by M. L. Birdsall.

From the wording of this contract it is evident that no company had been formed and no charter obtained at that time, and that Andrew Briscoe was alone in the enterprise, no doubt, however, expecting to enlist others with him afterwards.

In the "Morning Star" (a newspaper published in Houston) for May 16, 1840, appears the following notice:

Harrisburg and Brazos Railroad.

It is gratifying to notice the progress made by the enterprising proprietors of this work. A large number of laborers are engaged at present in throwing up the track and preparing it for rails at an early season, and a greater number will soon be employed. The enterprise and resolution manifested by the projectors, far from exciting feelings of jealousy among the citizens of this place, call for the most unequivocal praise and emulation. The Houston and Brazos Rail Road will have very few if any interests at variance with those of the Harrisburg Road, as they are projected to terminate at points on the Brazos widely apart from each other. We wish them both the most complete success, and we have not the least doubt that in time both will attain it.

In the same paper, on various dates, appeared the following advertisement: "Wanted to hire, sixty negro men for which good wages will be given and secured, to work on the Harrisburg and Brazos Railroad. They will be taken for not less than six months, and kept two years if desired. Harrisburg, March 18th, 1840."

This was signed by A. Briscoe.

Among my early recollections is that of jumping my horse over the ditches of this grade, and seeing the ties scattered for miles along the route. I infer from the wording of the tie contract that the funds to pay for this work were expected to be largely realized from the sale of Harrisburg town lots and lands. This, no doubt, was on account of the slow sale of property and the impossibility of enlisting foreign capital because of the unsettled condition of the country. A Mexican invasion being probable at any time, the enterprise was abandoned.

In March, 1847, the Harrisburg Town Company sold and transferred all the unsold town lots and lands to Sidney Sherman, who,

after repeated trips to the North, succeeded in inducing northern capital to invest in his enterprise, which was the building of a railroad from Harrisburg westward. Of course the Harrisburg town lots and lands were used as an inducement, as after the organization of a company these lands represented fifteen hundred shares of paid up stock. A charter was applied for and obtained under the name of the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos, and Colorado Railroad, by an act of the third legislature, February 11, 1850. The company was organized June 1, 1850. The incorporators were Sidney Sherman, Hugh McLeod, John G. Todd, John Angier, Jonathan F. Barrett, E. A. Allen, Wm. M. Rice, W. A. van Alstyne, James H. Stevens, B. A. Shepherd, and W. J. Hutchins. Jonathan F. Barrett was made president, and in the early spring of 1851 John A. Williams of Boston, Mass., as locating engineer, commenced the survey near the west bank of Buffalo Bayou in the town of Harrisburg. Late in the year 1852, the first locomotive and iron were received, and track-laying commenced; and by the first of August, 1853, twenty miles were completed, and the event was celebrated by a barbecue at Staffords Point.

The first locomotive was named "General Sherman," and it weighed probably ten or twelve tons. It had one pair of screws, four and a half or five feet in diameter, with inside connections and with four ordinary track wheels in front. The tender was not apparently different from those now in use, except in size. F. A. Stearns of Massachusetts was master mechanic, and I believe the first to pull a throttle on a locomotive in Texas, if not the first west of the Mississippi River.

The "General Sherman" did the road good service. It was in use until about 1869 or 1870, and was the first locomotive to cross the Colorado River, into the town of Columbus, in the year 1867.

The second locomotive received was called the "Texas." It was not like any I have ever seen, before or since. Engine and tender were on one frame, mounted on two pairs of drivers, thirty-two or thirty-four inches in diameter, placed some sixteen or eighteen feet apart, connected outside to a rocking shaft in the center. This machine was of very little service to the road; it would move heavy loads on a straight track, but would not follow curves, ex-

cept where they were very slight. It was soon consigned to the scrap-heap, and afterwards sold to run a sawmill.

Other locomotives came later, and their names follow in the order in which they were received: "Austin," "Columbus," "Richmond," and "Harrisburg." These were not very different in appearance from the engines now in use, except that they were of much lighter weight. They comprised all that the road owned up to the time when it was sold (1868) and its name changed to the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railroad.

About the first of December, 1855, the track was completed to the east bank of the Brazos River, opposite the town of Richmond, making thirty-two miles in all. To construct a suitable bridge over the Brazos River at that time would necessitate delay in building the road, and cost a great deal of money. The state legislature had passed several acts to assist railroad-building, one of which authorized the loan of six thousand dollars on every mile of road completed; therefore it was politic to devote all energy to adding miles of track. But the river had to be crossed, so a temporary bridge was decided on. In 1856 an ordinary pile bridge, only about six feet above the water at a low stage, was built, perhaps one hundred feet below the permanent bridge now in use, leaving an opening of fifty feet for the passage of steamboats and other vessels which occasionally navigated the river at that time. This opening was covered by one span, supported or braced by logchains underneath. A large flatboat was kept moored under the span to carry it out of place when desired. The bridge being so low, it was supposed that when a rise in the river occurred the drift would not accumulate sufficiently to do any harm until the water rose higher than the bridge and allow the drift to pass over; but this proved to be a mistake. The bridge caught the drift, which at one time threatened to form a permanent raft, the river being blocked for two or three hundred feet; and it was only after a great deal of labor, with the assistance of a steamboat that happened to come up at the time, that the raft was cleared. Then three more spans of similar construction and length were added, making an opening of about two hundred feet for the passage of drift. The spans were always floated out of place on flatboats, and moved to the bank, when a rise in the river came. On such occasions the road used

the public ferry, and frequently the bridge was out of use for weeks and sometimes for months. This bridge was approached on each side by a very steep incline, so that it was necessary for a train of any length to cross with all the speed possible in order to make the opposite hill. The bridge was used from the time it was built in 1856 or 1857, until about 1870. I remember only two accidents of any consequence on it, one in 1860, and the other in 1867. In each case, one of the spans gave way, throwing the train into the river and killing two or three men. To cross the bridge was very trying on the nerves of passengers. They were usually given the privilege of crossing on the ferry if they desired, a privilege that a great many of them accepted.

In the fall of 1859, Eagle Lake station was opened, and the following fall Alleyton, just eighty miles from Harrisburg, became the western terminus of the road. Austin was the objective point at this time; but, after some twelve or fifteen miles in the direction of La Grange had been graded, the Civil War came on and stopped all railroad building. The citizens of Columbus, fearing they would be passed by, built a branch about two and one-half miles long from Alleyton to the east bank of the Colorado opposite the town during the war. This branch was not much used until a bridge was constructed over the river and the track laid into the town. This was accomplished in 1867, when Columbus became the western terminus, and it remained such until after the road changed owners and name. The route was then directed towards San Antonio, instead of Austin, and this branch became part of the main line. Construction was then pushed until San Antonio was reached, and, after a short delay at this point, the road was continued on to El Paso, where it met the Southern Pacific from the west. After this, the road made an important link in the Southern Pacific system across the continent, which no doubt would have crossed the northern part of the State, but for the energy exerted in pushing the construction of the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio line.

The gauge adopted at the start was four feet, eight and one-half inches, which is now the standard gauge all over North America. This is a very remarkable occurrence, as at that time it was very uncertain what gauge would be established. Many roads in Texas

adopted a different gauge, and hundreds of miles of road had to be changed at an enormous expense.

The first passenger coaches used on this road were no doubt made for street cars, and probably employed as such in Boston, before they were brought to Texas. They would seat about twenty passengers each, and were mounted on four wheels. They were used but a short time, as it was difficult to keep them on the track. The last use I remember that was made of one of them was at Eagle Lake in the winter of 1859-1860. The car was placed at one end of the warehouse and used for an office and bedroom by the agent and the clerk. Michael Quin was the agent, and the writer hereof was the clerk. The roof leaked like a sieve, and the car had no heating arrangement; but by the use of tarpaulins to cover the top of it, and a ten gallon pot, confiscated out of the freight of some one, in which to build a fire, we managed to get along.

No telegraph line that could be used was constructed by the road until 1868. Prior to that date, two mixed trains, one each way, usually did the business. They had a leaving time and a meeting time and place; but beyond these they had little use for a schedule. When either train failed to reach the meeting point on time, they met at the nearest turnout or switch. This occurred very frequently. The writer served as conductor of one of the trains during the years 1866 and 1867; and he remembers meeting and passing, on one occasion, two trains of ten or fifteen cars each on a spur switch that would hold only an engine and one car.

The general office and shops were located at Harrisburg until railroad connection was made between Houston and New Orleans, but since that time Harrisburg has been virtually abandoned in favor of Houston. The offices and shops were moved, and the Harrisburg lands that played such an important part in starting and building the road were put on the market and sold for what they would bring. So the owners of the town of Harrisburg, after all their efforts and sacrifice, lost the road and their lands as well.